

HONOLULU, HAWAII TERRITORY, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 12, 1909.

Hello!  
Number?

## CHANGES IN THE "SYSTEM"

By  
James T. Stacker

Out in the Bishop Museum are two telephones marked as the first put in use here. They are well finished in birdseye maple and bear the monogram of Kalakaua on the wooden box that once held the batteries. But history antedates these a little while for, it is said, and on very good authority, that Thomas G. Thrum has the distinction of owning the first telephones ever used in the Hawaiian Islands, when he had one in his store on Fort street and the other in the printing shop which he owned. Then came the one owned by Kalakaua which operated from the palace to the King's boathouse.

These were followed by one constructed by the late Samuel G. Wilder between the Honolulu Hale semaphores and the Diamond Head signal station. Senator Dickey, whose brother was superintendent of a company at Omaha, was also interested in a line, probably one between his house and somewhere else. The Kalakaua short line was the outcome of a visit by the Princess Kaiulani to the coast. In her entourage was the late James Dowsett, not Kimu Pelekane, but his son, who died in the 90's. At the time of the royal visit there was an exhibition of telephones, a sight taken in by every one who went to the city. That was in 1877 or '78.

It was not until 1880 that a company was thought of for Honolulu. A company that would put in operation a public service phone. C. O. Berger, a son-in-law of Herman Widemann, while on the Coast investigated the matter thoroughly and made some sort of arrangement with the people who controlled the American Bell telephones. There had been a bitter fight between Alexander Graham Bell and Edison over the patents and Edison lost. Bell had the business for himself and the American Bell Telephone Company was organized. On the Coast it was difficult to get anyone of means to go into the scheme because everything electrical had burned the fingers. One man in San Francisco, rich beyond the thought of avarice, had something like six thousand machines requiring the use of electricity, and, as the community angel, he was looked upon as ready to go into the company that was being organized over there. There was nothing doing, however.

The Southern Pacific company was just finishing the installation of a telegraph system about that time and John Cassidy was in charge of the work. The promoters of a California Telephone Company used their persuasive eloquence on him to go into a telephone company and failed. He was offered "ground floor" chances but he could see nothing in it and studiously and industriously allowed himself to become anything but a millionaire. He could have been rich but wouldn't be.

### Cassidy Arrived.

In casting about for someone to go to the Islands and install a telephone system the eyes of Mr. Berger fell upon this same John Cassidy and he accepted a short term contract that was offered. That was twenty-nine years ago and with the exception of an occasional visit to the mainland he has been here ever since.

"About the first thing I did after settling here," said Mr. Cassidy the other day, "was to dismantle the Wilder line to Diamond Head. Was it much? Well, rather. The line was built of heavy fence wire and over lava rocks and rough land. I had a hard time to get it out of the way. Naturally the public line was not a long one at the start. After we had been in operation a very short time there was a cry for an extension to the other side of the Island and it was a large undertaking. But there were plantations on that side and the owners were

sufficiently interested in learning what was going on outside of them and their families were as much concerned here in what was taking place at the plantations so that sufficient inducement was made for the company to act.

### First Steamer Signals.

"Before the completion of the telephone line there was no way of learning when a steamer was coming along. Afterwards directly one was sighted at Waimanalo the fact was made known to 'Central' and by him, we had men in those days, to the public. The whistle would blow three times for a steamer off Waimanalo so that even those who were not subscribers had knowledge of her expected arrival. The original operator in the Honolulu office was a man by the name of Briggs, who is now in San Jose. He came down at my request and he had very little to do in the office. I had two beds in the office which was in Honolulu Hale, and Briggs occupied one and I the other. During the day when the calls were few he used to walk around the waterfront looking at the immigrants from Europe and Asia who happened to be coming in at the time. One night he expressed himself as feeling under the weather and for some reason I allowed him to sleep in my bed and I took his. The next day he was quite ill and I told him it would not do for him to remain there as I was out too much to give him the attention I believed he needed. I had him removed to the Queens Hospital and a few hours later, while I was on the other side of the island with some line men, Briggs was removed to the quarantine station on the island. It had been discovered that he had contracted smallpox, presumably from contact with immigrants. When it was learned that I had slept in his bed Doctor McKibbin, examining physician, remarked that my belongings would have to be destroyed by fire and everything went; bedding, clothing and trinkets along with the Briggs collection of apparel. Doctor McKibbin marveled at my escape and put it down to robust health and a strong constitution. I never suffered any bad effects except the loss of my clothing.

### Kicks Began Early.

"The telephone system of Honolulu in the early days was different from that of today. But in proportion to the number of phones in use we had, I guess, almost as many kicks as 'Central' gets today. The system then had telephones requiring a double line. For instance, if you were on 34 and you wanted to talk with the man who had 43 you pulled down the lever at the side of the box and gave the number you wished and then your own. When you were through talking you again pulled down the lever and waited until Central intimated a desire to hear of your wants. You said 'Disconnect' and the incident closed. If the operator was not told to disconnect the line would stand connected for an indefinite period.

### Cranks and Cranks.

At one time there were instruments used that had a crank on one side and when an operator was wanted the crank had to be turned until your bell rang. Any break in the line, unless the subscriber had information to that effect, would cause lots of annoyance and the cranks were in almost continuous activity. It may be said, parenthetically, that the cranks were not always on the boxes. This class of instruments was used, mostly, on private or long distance lines.

In the old days the telephone was really more of a household necessity than now. If one did not care to walk to the next room or take his watch from his pocket he had only to ask 'Central' and he was accommodated.

If there was a whistle heard at any hour, night or day, 'Central' would obligingly tell any subscriber the name of the steamer approaching. If a subscriber wished to be called at any hour, Central would do it. One minute after the whistle announced a foreign steamer approaching port nearly every receiver was removed from the hooks and Central asked to name the vessel. This got to be such a nuisance that the company gave notice on a certain date that after that time within three minutes from the sound of the whistle all subscribers might take down their receivers and for five minutes afterward the operator would announce the name of the steamer, no connections being made during that time. Nor would this information be furnished after the time specified had lapsed.

### Shopping by Phone.

Those were "good old days" for the public and a house without a telephone was as barren as one without a baby. It may not be exaggerating to say that ladies had dresses fitted by telephone and the idea of going to market to buy was preposterous. I am informed by an ex-operator that it was a frequent occurrence for people to have him order the marketing from the butcher and groceries from the grocer. Can anyone imagine the reply he would get from an operator of today if he sent in such a request?

### Amateur Central.

"We had a great deal of annoyance from the practical jokers around town," remarked Mr. Cassidy. We had, sometimes, as many as seventy-five numbers on a single calling line and if anything went wrong with that line, in the office, all of the telephones on it were out of commission and would remain so until the office was notified and a lineman sent out to find the trouble. If one of these jokers happened to take down the receiver and learn that the calling line was out of whack it was his turn to make more trouble for the operators. One young man, now in business on Merchant Street, and who is known for his enjoyment of practical joking, was a culprit on one occasion. Of course, I did not know this at the time but I learned afterwards that for fifteen minutes in one day he acted as Central in the office where he was employed, intercepting messages intended for Central. It went something like this: After repeated calling one party would call for a number, let us say 123. The young fellow would take it all right but the caller, not receiving a reply, would ask again and the joker would very carefully repeat a number entirely different and when he had the man worked up to the proper state of wrath he would coolly ask him his number. Of course this does not seem as funny when I tell it as it did to the two or three young men who were in the office when it occurred. It was said that the reason for the instrument in that office burning out at the time was the amount of swearing that went over the line during those fifteen minutes."

### Some Drawbacks.

Another thing to illustrate the accommodating disposition of the operators. If a lady or gentleman intending to spend the evening elsewhere than in their own home would notify Central the fact was communicated to anyone ringing up and the person inquiring was told where he or she could be found. This was a great accommodation to physicians and others, but it occasionally worked to their disadvantage. For instance: Smith or Jones would leave home, ostensibly for his place of business, but really to visit a friend for a quiet evening. His wife, of course, was in ignorance of this. Arriving at the friend's house he possibly called up another friend and his voice was recognized by the operator. Later the wife would ring up her husband's place of business expecting he was there and the operator would tell her to ring up the number of the friend's house where he was to be found. The operator would recognize a voice instantly.

### Kickers, of Course.

For several years there was one operator and the service was all that the average man could wish for. Of course there were kickers, just as there are today. A business man was talking "modern telephone" the other day just after he had had a little experience. His story was to the effect that his wife had asked him to attend to some business on his arrival in town and to notify her by phone of the result. On reaching his office he called Central and asked for his house number. Central replied that the line was busy and on calling again he was told the telephone had been taken out. He asked her when and the girl said about two months previously. He said this must be a mistake as it was in his house. She said it made no difference, the instrument had been taken out. Then his patience was exhausted and he made a peremptory demand and got the desired connection. This gentleman said at the time he was relating his experience, "The best service was in the old days for the operators were always polite. I realize as much as anyone the annoyances they are put to and the abuse they receive, but at the same time I do not consider that they pay sufficient attention to the calls. When I get a polite answer to a request now days it is really so refreshing that I cannot realize it comes from the telephone office."

The duties of the operators have been multiplied and the number of those in Central increased. This may have something to do with the mistakes that are made just as the mistakes had to do with abandoning the system and promoting the automatic.

### The First Rival.

A gentleman was asked the other day why the original Bell telephone company had for a rival an organization put into existence by the very men who started the Bell.

"There was internal dissension," replied he, "and Mr. Widemann became dissatisfied. With that came dissatisfaction from the public. I think there was a fear that a thousand shares of the Bell stock held in England would be turned over to the dissenters so the late James Campbell commissioned some one in London to buy it for him. That practically prevented the dissenters from getting control. The men who were willing to go into the new company were men of business interests here and men of means. They drew William G. Irwin into it and a franchise was asked for and granted against the opposition of those in the Bell company. On August 23, 1883, the new company was organized with Herman Widemann as president, Henry Waterhouse, vice president; A. Jaeger, secretary and treasurer, and S. M. Damon, auditor. In addition there were, besides Mr. Widemann, A. J. Cartwright and John Paty in the board of directors."

### Stockholders Did It.

"To those who were not informed it looked like the usual form of doing things in Honolulu. Once a man showed that there was money in an enterprise there was always some one to go into the same line. The fact that the original promoters of the Bell company were promoters of the Mutual put another light on the affair. This seemed to be done for the reason that the stockholders were dissatisfied. In 1884 William G. Irwin wrote to the Spreckels in San Francisco stating the case. He wanted someone familiar with telephone construction to come here and install a plant.

### Pratt Came Suddenly.

"At that time James W. Pratt was with a telephone company in San Francisco and the place was offered him. He had only a few days in which to consider the offer and he decided to accept it and he left there on February 15th. Construction of the new line was begun in May of that year."

On the subject Mr. Pratt says:

"I put up the first telephone line in the State of California. It was a short one between the residence of ex-Governor Blaisdell and the Western Union office. We used only hand telephones in those days and the equipment of that line consisted of two of those in addition to the wire. The receiver such as was used a few years afterward was unheard of at that time as was the Blake transmitter."

### Clashed Often.

"The new company had the enmity of the owners of the pioneer company and there were some amusing incidents as a result. Mr. Cassidy, who I consider the best telephone man that ever visited Honolulu, and a man whose knowledge of electricity in its commercial workings is surpassed by few in the States, was the superintendent of the Bell. We clashed as often as the Mutual company wanted to extend its lines in a direction covered by Cassidy. He fought as hard for his company as I fought for mine. When the time came for me to run cables along South street I found it necessary to cut the wires of the opposition company at the junction of King and began to do so. The Bell people got out an injunction and the case went into the courts where I was beaten.



That is, I was beaten as far as damages to the Bell went, but in the end I consider we had the best of it. That was about the biggest fight we ever had except the time we took their chief operator, Louis Whiting. That created a hubbub that made a noise like something doing.

"Whiting had been in the service of E. C. Fellows, of the A and P company in Oakland, from the time he was graduated from the Oakland High School and was a good fellow. He came down for the Bell folks and got a room somewhere in town and one morning was found dead in bed. He had worked a dozen years here and given satisfaction. While I was in the telephone service we had two fires. Both companies were burned out of their offices and Cassidy and I worked together to save what property we could. When the companies consolidated January 1st, 1895, I was con-

tinued as superintendent for a time and Mr. Cassidy occupied all of his time with the government electric lights, a position he had filled for some time. Later he came back into the telephone business and I retired to enter the government service."

Mr. Cassidy remained with the Mutual company for several years, going to the Coast finally with a view to remaining there permanently; but the lure of the Pacific was greater than he could stand and he came back and entered the service of the Hawaiian Electric Company, where he now is. Of the early operators still living here are Doctor Sinclair, Charlie Herriek, Charles S. Crane, manager of the Hawaiian Gazette Company, Henry Crane, collector for the same company, and Charles J. Peterson, who was for a time district magistrate. Edmund Hart, also a pioneer operator, is a clerk in the second circuit court, on Maui.

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